**Remember**
September 11, 2011

John Buchanan, Pastor
Fourth Presbyterian Church

Psalm 46
Isaiah 35:1–10
Matthew 8:23–27

"Why are you afraid?"
Matthew 8:26 (NRSV)

No matter how dark and widespread the shadows of death, God is with us. To guide us. To comfort us. . . . And to point us to the day when all sit at table together, when former enemies become friends, when abundance overflows and covers the earth. We are bearers of a dream, a vision that refuses to be distorted by hatred, anger, and fear; a dream of forgiveness, love, and righteousness.

Jack Stotts
*From an address delivered 28 September 2001*

*We gather here this morning, under a bright blue sky and brilliant sun to remember what happened ten years ago. We gather with fellow Americans, here and around the world, to remember, to ponder, to commend again to your eternal mercy dear people who died. And we gather to listen for your word of comfort and truth and challenge. So quiet us now that we might hear the word you have for us. In Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

Remember. It's what we're doing today. All over the country people are gathering to remember: at Ground Zero, in churches, synagogues, and mosques, before football games, in public parks and city streets. It is important to remember. "Do this in remembrance of me," Jesus said to his disciples on the night before he died. Michael Jenkins, President of Louisville Presbyterian Seminary, said that remembering "is among the most courageous things we do. It is also among the most important. Remembering connects us to our past, but is a way that guides our future" ("9/11," michaeljinkins.blogspot.com, 6 September 2011).

It is important to remember and it is healing to remember, to tell the story of what happened and where we were and what we were doing and how we felt and what we did then. Thinking about the tenth anniversary of the

attacks on America and the fact that it would be a Sunday morning and I would be in the pulpit, I pulled from the files all the accumulated material about how it was around here and remembered, as if it were yesterday. Each of us has memories.

I was at my desk reading when my spouse said from the next room something about an airplane flying into a building in New York City. I didn't pay much attention until, a little while later, she said it looks like a second airplane has flown into a building in New York City; you better get down to church. Tuesday morning is the time the staff meets here. I asked the program staff to assemble in my office, where there is a television set, and we stood and sat together and watched as the first World Trade Center tower crumbled and fell to the ground. We watched in disbelief as the second tower began to fall. A television commentator said something about other tall buildings in American cities being potential targets. One of them, of course, is directly across the street, the John Hancock Center. Our building was already humming with activity. In addition to the staff present, there were AA meetings and other programs beginning and there were maybe seventy-five children in the Day School and Day Care Center. We began immediately to call parents to return for the children and put in motion a plan to evacuate quickly and get the little ones away from here. Outside the church, by now, Michigan Avenue, Chestnut, and Delaware were full of people, having evacuated and walking west, away from the tall buildings. It was a sight I will never forget.

I suggested that our staff people were free to leave, go home, if they chose. No one did. It was my proudest moment. There was work to do. We prepared email prayers and devotions, organized a noon public prayer service and another one at the end of the day. People came all day long to pray, many people. We contacted our neighbors at Chicago Sinai Congregation and Holy Name Cathedral and organized a Community Service of Prayer and Remembrance for later in the week. My dear friends, Father Bob McLaughlin and Rabbi Michael Sternfield, and I led the service together. This sanctuary was full, with people standing in the aisles and balconies and narthex. Rabbi Sternfield was to lead the closing prayer and he suggested that we all, all of us, join our voices—Jews in praying the Kaddish, the Prayer for the Dead, which every Jew knows, and Christians the Lord's Prayer—and we did and it was unforgettable as our voices, in Hebrew and English, rose up together and filled the sanctuary.

A week and a half later, on Friday afternoon, I had been invited to speak at a memorial service at Holy Name Cathedral, organized by the Flight Attendants Organization and the Association of Airline Pilots, to honor and remember the crews that were lost on United Airlines flights 175 and 93. The cathedral was full of United Airlines blue uniforms. It was a vulnerable congregation, proud professionals who had lost eighteen of their friends

and colleagues. They had, I thought, felt the full brunt of this thing, a terrible reminder of their own vulnerability every time they go to work.

I never felt more inadequate. I reached for words. I told them they were our neighbors, our hometown airline that had taken us where we wanted to go and brought us safely home. I told them we were grateful for them and proud of them, that God loved their friends who had died and that God loved them too.

Eighteen candles stood on the high altar at Holy Name and were lighted by colleagues, pilots, flight attendants as a choir sang “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” Father McLaughlin prayed and blessed us and sent us out into the world. I remember feeling drained, weary and discouraged at my own inadequacy to find words to help, still very much wondering and worrying about my country.

And then a remarkable thing happened. I was walking up State Street, with my pulpit robe over my arm and a clerical collar on. On the corner was a man, I assumed homeless, singing, for some reason, at full voice, “Take Me out to the Ballgame.” He saw me coming. I couldn’t avoid him, and prepared to be asked for money. As I approached he said, “Father,”—that’s what happens when you wear a collar near the cathedral; I was already reaching for my wallet to get this over with—“Father,” he said, “there’s only one God, right?” I said, “Yes,” thinking this is really going to be expensive. He continued, “So if there’s just one God, then we’re all sort of the same, right?” I had to agree with that too. And then, instead of asking for money, he said, “So cheer up. Father, we’re all going to be OK.” And he did the most extraordinary thing: like the major league baseball pitcher, the closer, when he strikes out the last batter and nails down the win, who raises his arm and points an index finger straight up into the heavens, that’s what he did. I joined him, pointing up into the sky. He said it again, “We’re going to be OK, Father.”

Walter Brueggemann has written that one of the things 9/11 did was drive us back, all the way back, to ultimate issues of life and death, ultimate fear, and finally ultimate confidence and hope in a God who loves us and will never abandon us, will never let us go, and whose love is greater even, more powerful, than death.

9/11 did other things as well, some of them good things and some not so good.

We learned that we are not invulnerable, which is a good thing. We learned that we are intimately connected to the rest of the world, which is also a good thing. We learned that our self-perception of our nation as generous

and good and just and kind is not shared universally, a very difficult thing for us to learn.

We learned to be afraid, which is not always good. Appropriate fear motivates us to be cautious, prudent, to assure that people aren't carrying guns and knives and bombs onto airplanes. But psychological studies of the dynamics of fear show how fear can become obsessive, can literally take over an individual's thinking and acting and can create a kind of tunnel vision so that we can't see anything else. Obsessive fear causes us to act destructively. Robert Frost said that there is nothing so frightening as a frightened person. Grief turned into anger and then combined with fear and caused us to lose sight of basic, precious American values, and there began a sad and tragic time: racial profiling; secret rendition—Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib; demonization of Islam; attacks on mosques; suspension of habeas corpus for suspected terrorists and criminals, the very foundation of our precious system of justice; and torture. Senator John McCain observed that we were doing things to prisoners for which we put Japanese officials on trial for war crimes. We are slowly moving forward, but we did see what fear can do, and it was appalling.

We were reminded and learned again that human beings can be cruel and "brilliantly, creatively evil," Madeline Albright said after 9/11. And we learned that human beings can be brilliantly and creatively good and selfless and courageous. Who will ever forget fire fighters, police officers, rescue workers walking into a towering inferno, knowing that the chances of returning were slim? Who will ever forget the fire department chaplain anointing kneeling firefighters with oil before they went into battle?

Who will ever forget United Flight 93 and what went on to prevent that plane from hitting the Capitol Building or the White House? I will always remember the selfless courage expressed that day by people like Tom Burnett, one of the passengers, who, when he realized what was happening, that other planes had hit the World Trade Center towers and Pentagon, that flight 93 was also highjacked and had turned around and headed east toward Washington, called his wife on his cell phone. "I know we are going to die," he said, "but some of us are going to do something about it." That's courage. That's worth remembering.

Madeline Albright said that "in those words we can hear the fundamental question put to us by God. . . . We are all mortal. What divides us is the use we make of our time and opportunities on earth" (from a speech at House of Hope Presbyterian Church, St. Paul, Minnesota, 20 September 2001).

There was something about 9/11 that taught us how very precious our lives are, that each day is a gift given to us, each hour an opportunity to live fully,

to embrace the world and our life in it, the earth and our time on it, to not waste it, to live it, full bore, holding back nothing.

Good friend and distinguished scholar Martin Marty keeps a plaque in his study containing words of a nineteenth-century Swiss philosopher, Henry Frederick Amiel: “Life is short and we have never too much time for gladdening the hearts of those who are traveling the dark journey with us. Oh, be swift to love; make haste to be kind.”

In a new book, *Trauma and Grace*, Serene Jones, President of Union Theological Seminary in New York, suggests that 9/11 sent our nation into the equivalent of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which is defined as a deep wound, not only to body but to spirit and soul and emotion. Its symptoms include numbness, emotional and sometimes physical paralysis, depression, and destructive, sometimes self-destructive, behavior. When I read her book, I found myself wondering if post-traumatic stress disorder is not responsible for the profound and unprecedented polarization in our nation and in the body politic. We are virtually paralyzed at the moment, it seems, incapable of making the kind of compromise, doing the negotiating across party and ideological lines, that make a diverse democracy viable.

One of the things therapists do with PTSD patients is help them remember —help them remember and tell stories that remind them of who they are and who they can be.

“Remember me,” Jesus said. One of my favorite remembrances of him is that time he fell asleep in the stern of a boat in the middle of a storm that scared his friends to death. Matthew, Mark, and Luke, all three, remember this little story. Historians tell us that it was a favorite of the early Christian church, which must have felt as if it were in the middle of a storm with the boat sinking, what with increasing hostility and persecution from the awesome power of the Roman Empire. One of the earliest symbols of the church is a ship heading into a storm. It’s the reason why the ceilings of church buildings often resemble the inverted hull of a boat. So the early Christians loved this story, which reminded them that they were not alone in the boat, that Jesus would calm that storm, and that they had nothing finally, ultimately to fear, even in the midst of a most violent storm.

These are hard-working, mostly young, blue-collar men in the boat, experienced fishermen who know about physical challenges and aren’t afraid of much, but at that moment they are truly frightened. There are other small boats with them. Jesus had asked them to take him to the other side, an overnight sail. But now there’s a storm. They can’t see the other boats; some of them are struggling to fasten down the sail; others are furiously rowing to keep the little boat from slipping sideways into the trough of a wave; some are furiously bailing water because it is coming over

the sides. Someone is still at the rudder. And they are all thinking about their wives and children and what they never got around to doing or saying in their short lives. They think this might be it.

Jesus is asleep. I've never been in a little boat in a storm like that. But I was on a ferry once on the Irish Sea between Scotland and Northern Ireland with a group from this church, when a storm—a gale, in fact—came up. The ferry dipped and plunged and wallowed; waves crashed over the top of the boat; dishes and glasses from the galley were crashing to the floor. Some of us, to be honest, were not feeling well. Some were lying on the floor. Someone I know was sitting in a corner, trying to keep her eyes on the sky, quietly singing "Amazing Grace." Calum MacLeod, I recall, was eating a sausage sandwich. I was standing outside, holding on for dear life. Watching the horizon and, if truth were told, praying. And the thought did occur to me that the boat might not come up out of one of those troughs. I didn't see anybody taking a nap.

So his friends wake Jesus, sleeping on a cushion in the stern of the little boat. "Don't you care that we're about to perish here? How about helping out a bit?" And he does: "Why are you afraid," he asks as the waves are crashing over them, "you of little faith?" And he "rebuked the winds and sea," Matthew says, and there was calm. I don't know what happened. I can't begin to explain it. Calm was restored. Order returned. They didn't perish that night, even though they thought they might.

"Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?"

The good news is that there is no reason to fear, ultimately. Of course there are things to be afraid of and worry about. But nothing ultimately. In Jesus Christ ultimate things have been resolved.

Sometimes the storm is violent and life threatening. And we are all, finally, in the boat together. We can hold on to one another and comfort and cheer one another and tell stories and remind one another of who we are and who God is, because there is somebody else in the boat with us, back there in the stern, quietly, almost secretly but with the power and grace and courage and peace of God in him.

At a memorial service yesterday for a dear member of our congregation, a young woman who loved life and battled critical disease for a decade, I was grateful to be able to read words one of those early Christians wrote to a small church in the city of Rome. St. Paul said, "I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38).

Matthew doesn’t describe the rest of the voyage, just that they reached the other side. But I’ve always liked imagining what it was like as the first rays of the early morning sun appeared over the mountain and there was a fresh breeze and calm water. I know they breathed a huge sigh of relief, and I’ll bet they stretched their tense muscles and maybe recounted the most harrowing moments and maybe even joked a bit and laughed at what a night it had been. And they stole glances at the one, the one whose love would never abandon them, sitting calmly in the stern.

Jesus Christ from whom nothing will ever separate us.

Remember.

Remember him.

Amen.